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Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development

Annual full-day discussion on the human rights of women

Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Summary

In accordance with resolution 6/30, the Human Rights Council convened its annual full-day discussion on the human rights of women. The discussion was divided into two panels: the first focused on the theme "The impact of violence against women human rights defenders and women's organizations in digital spaces" and the second discussed the theme "Advancing women's rights in the economic sphere through access and participation in information and communication technologies".

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I. Introduction

1. On 21 and 22 June 2018, the Human Rights Council, pursuant to its resolution 6/30, convened its annual full-day discussion on the human rights of women. The discussion was divided into two panels: the first focused on the theme "The impact of violence against women human rights defenders and women's organizations in digital spaces"; the second focused on the theme "Advancing women's rights in the economic sphere through access and participation in information and communication technologies".

2. The webcast of the panel discussions is archived and can be reviewed at http://webtv.un.org.

II. The impact of violence against women human rights defenders and women's organizations in digital spaces

3. The first panel discussion was opened by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and moderated by the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Dubravka Šimonović. The panellists were Seyi Akiwowo, founder and Director of Glitch!UK; Nighat Dad, Executive Director of Digital Rights Foundation; and Matt Mitchell, Director of Digital Safety and Privacy at Tactical Technology Collective.

A. Opening Statement by the High Commissioner for Human Rights

4. In his opening remarks, the High Commissioner described the new opportunities brought about by the rise of the Internet, particularly as a tool for greater information, mobilization and participation. He also highlighted, however, that the digital space opened the door for new expressions of oppression and violence. He cited in particular intimidation and threats, including death threats and threats of sexual and gender-based violence, and defamation and disinformation campaigns, often of a sexualized nature, as manifestations of the forms of oppression and violence inflicted on women human rights defenders and activists online. The High Commissioner underlined that the connectivity of the Internet, combined with the rapid and massive dissemination of information, as well as anonymous profiles and the difficulty in removing false or violent content added layers of challenges in addressing online violence against women.

5. Paying tribute to the work of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and other activists, the High Commissioner pointed out that although all women could be subjected to online violence, women human rights defenders and those involved in politics or media work were particularly targeted. Research by the Internet and Democratic Project in India had found that discussions of domestic violence, marital rape, caste-based oppression and violations of the rights of religious minorities, as well as women expressing views on matters considered to be "men's business" were most likely to give rise to online abuse. Women could also face a heightened risk of violence if they challenged patriarchal structures or dominant racial or religious norms. The scale of violence could be exacerbated for women of a specific age, ethnicity, race, religion, disability, sexual orientation or gender identity.

6. The High Commissioner then elucidated the impact of online campaigns against women human rights defenders and organizations. These aimed, inter alia, to threaten, to damage credibility, to silence, to diminish or to obliterate the power of female voices and to restrict the already limited public space in which women activists and women's organizations could conduct their work and make a difference. While underlining the psychological effect of online violence on women human rights defenders, the High Commissioner pointed to its harmful impact on victims' right to privacy, to freedom of expression and to full participation in economic, social, cultural and political life as well as on their safety, often with total impunity for perpetrators. The High Commissioner referred

to several cases where online attacks had threatened the lives of women human rights defenders. For instance, following a series of online attacks in Viet Nam, environmental activist Le My Hanh was physically assaulted in 2017; a video featuring the attack was disseminated on social media. In India, Gauri Lankesh, a journalist who had published criticism of Hindu extremism, was killed in 2017 following widespread online calls for violence against her. Her colleague Rana Ayyub had previously been subjected to thousands of hate-filled messages, including calls for her to be gang-raped and murdered; her phone number and home address were disseminated. In Italy, the Speaker of Parliament, Laura Boldrini, faced death threats and threats of sexual torture.

7. The High Commissioner noted the importance of a multifaceted response to violence faced by women online, one that would involve States and corporate actors. Despite some initiatives taken by social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to regulate online violence, standards were privately established, rarely made public and inconsistently enforced. The High Commissioner reinforced the call of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression for the need to implement human rights standards transparently and consistently, with meaningful user and civil society input, and to provide a framework for holding both States and companies accountable to users across national borders. He stressed that international human rights law could provide the firm ground of universally accepted norms and for effective actions and accountability in that context. Finally, the High Commissioner reported that his Office had begun to work with technology companies to address threats and violence, and to implement the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

B. Overview of presentations

8. The moderator, Ms. Šimonović, introduced the panel and recalled that the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women had been established to address violence against women as a human rights violation. She echoed the High Commissioner's point that while technological development had opened many doors for women, at the same time it was a source of new forms of oppression and discrimination. Ms. Šimonović stressed the necessity of ensuring that women's rights were protected, both offline and online, taking into consideration heightened risks for women human rights defenders, politicians and journalists. She added that human rights mechanisms would be able to provide further guidance in that regard.

9. Reflecting on her report on online violence against women and girls (A/HRC/38/47), Ms. Šimonović emphasized the importance of adopting a rights-based approach in addressing the new forms of violence. Finally, she noted that those manifestations of violence should be understood within the larger context of worldwide systemic inequalities and gender-based discrimination.

10. Ms. Akiwowo explained that she had founded Glitch!UK as a non-profit organization in 2017 in response to the attacks and harassment she suffered after a video featuring her speaking at the European Youth Parliament was posted on the Internet. She pointed out five myths commonly used to deny online violence against women and its harmful impact. The first myth was the assumption that online violence against women and girls did not exist. Ms. Akiwowo drew on her personal experience as evidence that it did. In Europe, 9 million girls had experienced online violence, while globally women were 27 times more likely than men to be harassed online. Women with multiple identities faced additional abuse, as evidenced by the fact that women of African descent faced rates of online violence that were 10 times higher than other women.

11. The second myth was that by addressing online violence, the individual's right to freedom of expression was infringed. Ms. Akiwowo deconstructed the point by clarifying that online hateful acts and words aimed at undermining the freedom of expression of women and girls and to force them to conform to patriarchy and self-censorship. The third myth was that online violence had no harmful impact on women and girls. Ms. Akiwowo stressed that online violence affected various aspects of women's and girls' lives, including their health and well-being, and hindered the enjoyment of women's freedom of speech and

right to public participation. She debunked the fourth myth: that there were no solutions for addressing online violence. In that regard, she pleaded for a more proactive and transparent role by Internet intermediaries in order to change the nature, scale and effects of such violence on women, particularly those who were politically active.

12. Lastly, Ms. Akiwowo referred to the fifth myth: that the rights and responsibilities of citizenship could not be extended to digital spaces. She stated that digital citizenship education needed to be universally taught from an early age. She mentioned a number of programmes on Internet literacy aimed at providing young people with an understanding of the forms of online abuse, its impact and consequences. Ms. Akiwowo concluded that the phenomenon of driving women out of online public space was nothing new, but was merely an extension of a reality lived by millions of women and girls around the world.

13. Ms. Dad noted that violence against women human rights defenders was not a new global concept; only the forms of oppression had changed. For example, in Pakistan, women human rights defenders had increasingly been attacked by persons using false user profiles sending spyware and exposing them to surveillance and fraud and jeopardizing their physical safety. Ms. Dad described the experience of being the victim of many such attacks, noting the clear gender dimension of the abuse. She stressed that there was an important difference in the abuse directed at men and at women in that attacks against men targeted their work, whereas attacks against women were personal.

14. Ms. Dad discussed the strategies civil society had employed to prevent and combat online violence against women in Pakistan. Efforts aimed at building the capacity of women human rights defenders in countering cyber-attacks and harassment. Civil society had also established reporting mechanisms to hold accountable individuals or groups, such as social media companies, attacking defenders and activists or to shame them in case of a lack of response. Ms. Dad described how civil society was able to prevent malware and enhance accountability for Internet and social media platforms, notably through cyber-harassment helplines and digital security developed by organizations such as Access Now, Citizen Lab and Digital Rights Foundation.

15. Ms. Dad stressed the importance of adopting gender-sensitive laws and policies to ensure protection for the victims of such attacks. In that connection, she mentioned a cybercrime law in Pakistan which, although highly criticized, helped protect and support human rights defenders targeted by online harassment and abuse.

16. Mr. Mitchell stressed that directly affected and marginalized people had an important role to play in their protection online. Women activists needed adequate resources, information and support to fight prejudice and gendered forms of online abuse. In that connection, his organization had launched an initiative called the Gender and Tech Institute to defend the safety and well-being of women and other users in a context of inadequate or limited protection and remedies.

17. Turning to the role and responsibilities of private actors, Mr. Mitchell suggested that attacks on women rights defenders did not occur in a vacuum, and that technology and online spaces should afford people the chance not to recreate the misogyny and sexism witnessed in the offline world. He underscored that for technology companies to prevent all forms of online abuse and attacks would require only minimal changes to their platforms.

C. Statements by representatives of States and observers

18. During the interactive dialogue, speakers noted that online violence against women was a serious human rights violation and a form of gender-based violence. They affirmed that it was a manifestation of patriarchal societies that used laws, policies and institutions to deny women's and girls' rights, autonomy and equal participation, including in digital spaces.

19. Many speakers recognized that online platforms offered unparalleled opportunities to advance gender equality. They acknowledged, however, that the digital space was a mirror of the offline world, where women continued to face misogyny, marginalization, discrimination, harassment and violence. Societies were only at the beginning of the digital

era, yet some of the most serious forms of violence were prevalent in digital spaces; a misuse of such spaces could replicate or amplify violence experienced offline.

20. Speakers further emphasized that social media around the world was used to subject women human rights defenders to online harassment and abuse. One speaker said that 30 per cent of surveyed women had experienced online abuse and 40 per cent had said that online abuse was misogynistic or sexist in nature. There were also consistent references to the fact that online gender-based violence posed a growing challenge to women's and girls' use of the Internet, including for the purposes of political participation, freedom of expression and access to services and information. Speakers concurred that women human rights defenders faced double or multiple discriminations based on their gender and the nature of their work. Several expressed support for women human rights defenders and acknowledged their role as critical in the advancement of women's and girls' rights.

21. During the interactive dialogue, a number of questions were raised in relation to the role of States and non-State actors in ensuring safer digital spaces for women human rights defenders. Speakers said that the absence of reporting channels and the lack of adequate protection encouraged the use of digital technologies as tools to attack women human rights defenders. Speakers were clear in condemning any acts, intimidation or harassment against women human rights defenders and agreed that a multifaceted approach was needed, including the removal of barriers, the elimination of gender stereotypes and gender-sensitive mainstreaming in policymaking in general.

22. Several speakers referred to the development of comprehensive legal and institutional frameworks for safer digital spaces for women human rights defenders. They suggested, for instance, the establishment of e-safety regulatory organs and multi-stakeholder working groups, covering sectors such as education, media, culture and justice. Speakers indicated that public-private partnerships were essential to strengthening legal frameworks. It was also recommended that States commit to undertake full-scale reviews of hatred offences and to hold private companies accountable for complicity in violence, and requested that links between the right to privacy and the prevention of gender-based violence online be clearly addressed in legislation. The promotion of consultation with and the full participation of women and girls in the design and implementation of protection and empowerment policies and regulations was also highlighted.

23. Speakers suggested that a preventive approach be adopted to facilitate training, awareness-raising and campaigns, including at the community level, to promote social and behavioural change. Several references were made to the need to incorporate gender-responsive digital literacy in school curricula and materials.

24. Speakers strongly affirmed the need for international regulation to address the gender gaps within the information and communications technology (ICT) sector. Many stated that systematic gender mainstreaming was a prerequisite for sustainable development in accordance with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Finally, they stressed the importance of regional and international cooperation for women's empowerment in line with Sustainable Development Goals 5 and 16 and acknowledged the achievement of gender equality as key to preventing violence against women.

D. Responses of panellists and concluding remarks

25. In their responses and observations, the panellists elaborated on how to prevent and contain the phenomenon of online violence against women and fight impunity. Ms. Akiwowo indicated that lack of diversity in the workforce of technology companies had led to the failure of many platforms to take into account the diversity and gender of users. She suggested that Internet intermediaries be more transparent and more diverse in their workforce and follow a code of conduct with high standards. An application launched by the Mayor of London to report online hate crime was also mentioned. Ms. Akiwowo welcomed the idea of introducing digital citizenship education in schools, and especially gender-sensitive digital education for boys. Her organization had spoken to thousands of teenagers about how to be a digital citizen. She added that gender-disaggregated data

should be collected by States, while companies should fully resource civil society's actions against online violence.

26. Ms. Dad stressed that labelling women human rights defenders as "enemies of the State" had triggered online violence against them. She emphasized the need to adopt laws with multifaceted and rights-based approaches, as well as the importance of addressing the gaps in law enforcement by training law enforcement officers and judges. Ms. Dad recommended that intimidation, threats, violence and reprisals be investigated promptly and independently, whether perpetrated by States or non-State actors.

27. In his concluding remarks, Mr. Mitchell drew on experience within his own organization, highlighting that engaging with men and boys was critical; solutions required educating them on gender equality from an early age. The younger they were when engagement started, the better the outcomes would be. In terms of concrete steps taken by women's organizations in digital spaces, he referred to the need to focus on holistic security models in addressing harassment and abuse. He stressed the importance of taking personal digital safety seriously in social networks, reporting abuse, working together to find known offenders and engaging in advocacy with States and non-State actors.

28. Ms. Šimonović reminded all participants to look at the human rights framework developed at the international level and how it was translated into national laws and policies, including those relevant to encryption and the anonymity of female human rights defenders and politicians.

III. Advancing women's rights in the economic sphere through access and participation in information and communication technologies

29. The second panel discussion was opened by the Deputy United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. The keynote speech was made by the Minister for Fisheries and Equal Opportunities and Minister for Nordic Cooperation of Denmark, Eva Kjer Hansen. The panel was moderated by Anna Mori, Programme Officer and Partnerships Manager at the SheTrades initiative launched by the International Trade Centre. The panel comprised Chenai Chair, Researcher and Communications and Evaluations Manager at Research ICT Africa; Basheerhamad Shadrach, Coordinator for Asia at Alliance for Affordable Internet of the World Wide Web Foundation; and Rokhaya Solange Ndir, Head of Digital Ecosystem Relations at Sonatel.

A. Statement by the Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights

30. In her opening remarks, the Deputy High Commissioner reiterated that the same strengths and weaknesses of the offline world were to be found in the virtual space. As the latter had been built by people, its application and impact inevitably had a human dimension, and therefore a rights dimension. She stressed that ICTs and the "fourth industrial revolution" had changed the ways in which societies operated and changed the bases for exchange, cooperation and even conflict between and within all communities. ICTs therefore inevitably affected the enjoyment of human rights, which could have both a positive and a negative effect on women's and girls' rights. The negative impact had been clearly illustrated by the previous panel discussion on online violence against women human rights defenders.

31. Under the right circumstances, ICTs could serve as key enablers of women's and girls' rights, such as their rights to equality, health and education, and could be key in tackling multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. For example, ICTs could provide more affordable and inclusive educational opportunities for girls with disabilities by multiplying and diversifying learning means and methods. She stressed that ICTs could also help realize the right to health in cases where women's and girls' physical access to essential information and services, for example on sexual and reproductive health, was restricted or impeded by distance, lack of availability, discriminatory legislation or stigma

and bias. With health and education enhanced, ICTs could then directly improve women's equal access to economic opportunities. She highlighted that those technologies could be assets in efforts by and for women, including rural and isolated women, to build, broaden and enhance their peer and stakeholder networks and to strengthen support networks and provide access to online markets and critical forecasts and other financial services.

32. However, she cautioned that a persistent and growing gender digital divide was working against the huge potential of ICTs for accelerating women's and girl's enjoyment of their rights. While the divide was larger in low- and middle-income countries it existed worldwide, and in every context the offline population was disproportionately poor, rural, female and older. Women and girls who faced multiple forms of discrimination, such as those living with disability, in street situations, in rural areas or belonging to minority groups or indigenous communities, tended to face even higher levels of digital marginalization. She stressed, however, that the solutions too were clear and within reach. She recommended that active measures be taken to instil digital literacy, skills and confidence in girls and women and ensure that those with fewer financial resources could have affordable access to ICT devices or the Internet; to protect women's and girls' online presence against hate and harassment; to develop online content of specific relevance to women and girls, for instance comprehensive health information covering topics such as comprehensive sexuality education, safe abortion and contraception within the framework of sexual and reproductive health and rights; to transform the representation of women and girls in science, technology, engineering and mathematics and ensure their participation in the design, development and delivery of digital technologies, as well as in Internet governance; to address the widespread sexual harassment of women in science and technology; and to ensure that new and emerging technologies, and those who administered them, did not replicate or exacerbate existing harmful gender stereotypes and patterns of discrimination against women.

33. She concluded that international human rights norms and principles, especially equality, non-discrimination, inclusion, participation and the provision of effective remedies, should effectively guide any action taken in response to issues of access, use and misuse of ICTs. As the global network was inherently disrespectful of territorial jurisdiction, she reiterated that it was the duty of the international human rights system, including the Human Rights Council, to work for conditions that would respect, protect and promote the rights of women and girls on- as well as offline.

B. Keynote speech by the Minister for Fisheries and Equal Opportunities and Minister for Nordic Cooperation of Denmark

34. Ms. Kjer Hansen pointed out that developments in ICT were moving extremely fast, presenting both opportunities and risks for women's rights. She noted that more than 200 million fewer women than men were online, and the digital gender gap was widening. Women's and girls' access to and participation in ICTs needed to be enhanced in order to close the gap. The World Economic Forum estimated that 90 per cent of all future job would require ICT skills. Women and girls needed to be a part of that fast-growing sector.

35. She urged Governments and private companies to be more proactive in enhancing girls' engagement in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, including to fulfil Sustainable Development Goal 5. She mentioned initiatives launched by her Government in that regard: "TechPlomacy", focusing on the opportunities and challenges of the fourth industrial revolution, with development partners acting as catalysts in bridging the digital gender divide; and the "African girls can code" initiative, undertaken with the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the African Union, one objective of which was to conduct trainings on the African continent to equip young girls with digital literacy and coding skills.

36. She also highlighted that her Government was working with the information technology sector and educational institutions to break down barriers for female students. By reshaping and rewording its advertising and information materials, the IT University in

Copenhagen had tripled the number of female students in software development in two years. In concluding, Ms. Kjer Hansen reiterated that closing the digital gender gap was urgent and would lead to a better future for women worldwide.

C. Overview of presentations

37. The moderator, Ms. Mori, introduced the panel discussion by stating that, on average, women earned 20 per cent less than men globally and 40 per cent less than men in sub-Saharan African countries. She reiterated Ms. Kjer Hansen's observation, stating that approximately 250 million fewer women than men were online, more than the population of Brazil. According to ITU, the gap was narrowing in developed countries but widening in developing countries. Pointing to the failure to implement efficient, fast-paced, tailored and targeted interventions appropriate to the reality of different countries, she highlighted the importance of improving women's and girls' skills online, including their ability to conduct their business online and to increase their incomes so as to be able to reinvest into their families, communities, health and education.

38. Ms. Chair began by explaining that whether ICTs could benefit women's businesses would largely depend on the context. Research she had conducted in 2013 in the informal sector found, for example, that the type of device, the affordability of ICT services and the level of skills and social capital in the community were important factors for women in determining whether ICTs were beneficial in enhancing their businesses. Another important consideration was that the technologies women were using had been designed within a context of social bias and cultural norms that did not necessarily promote gender equality.

39. Therefore, while emerging and new data-driven technologies, such as artificial intelligence and machine learning, held the promise of enhancing human development, they bore the risk of replicating existing harmful gender stereotypes and patterns of discrimination against women in relation to their economic activities. She noted that bias against women started with those involved in the design of machine learning: if they held biased views against women, the outcome would likely be biased, which could lead to discrimination and exclusion. She recommended that further research be undertaken to increase the advantages of artificial intelligence for women and girls, such as studies on how to make it more inclusive; how to establish accountability and redress in cases of bias; and the impact of artificial intelligence on employment with an intersectional focus, taking into account, for example, gender and other factors such as race, disability and migration status. She concluded that if artificial intelligence was to improve the chances for women to claim their economic rights online, it was necessary to be critical of innovation and understand its application to the diverse contexts that women operated in.

40. Mr. Shadrach remarked that harmful gender stereotypes prevailing in communities were reflected in online spaces, often resulting in online harassment, trolling and abuse with the goal of forcing women out of those spaces. In that regard, in the economic sphere, in spite of the many positive stories that encouraged women to use the World Wide Web to their advantage, there was a lot to be done to empower, educate and enable women and girls to exploit the fullest potential of the Web and close the gender digital gap. He stressed, however, that women should not be seen as mere users of ICTs but as active entrepreneurs and highly qualified workers in the ICT field and were part of the ICT revolution.

41. He noted that his organization had recommended a unique method, named REACT, to close the digital gender gap and ensure full digital inclusion. The REACT framework, which stood for rights, education, access, content and target, offered a holistic approach to ensure that women and girls were able to exploit the power of the Internet for their socioeconomic gains as well as for empowering themselves. The framework focused on: protecting everyone's rights online ("rights"); equipping everyone, especially women, with skills necessary to access and use the Web effectively ("education"); ensuring free and affordable access to the open Web ("access"); ensuring relevant and empowering content for women ("content"); and setting and measuring concrete gender equity targets ("targets").

42. Ms. Ndir pointed out that, according to a report by Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, the region with the highest female entrepreneurial activity rate in the world — 25.9 per cent

— was sub-Saharan Africa. Therefore, ICTs were a crucial tool for women and girls to increase their representation and autonomy. Moreover, ICTs and the digital space allowed women to be educated, know their rights and claim them.

43. She shared concrete examples, based on her company's experience, of how private companies could further gender equality and women's rights. For example, her company had committed to absolute gender parity in its workforce by 2020. Currently, 40 per cent of the board of directors of Sonatel were women. In her company, women and men workers could receive equal family allowances. She also explained the company's "m-Women" programme, through which it organized leadership training and gave out awards for women in ICT. Sonatel had also signed a partnership agreement with the Ministry of Telecommunications of Senegal to campaign to train girls for a career in ICT. She concluded that closing the gender digital gap and achieving gender equality in the economic sphere required strong political will to involve women in governing and to implement parity laws, as well as to encourage the private sector to promote gender equality and women's rights. She also underscored that women themselves had an important role to play: they must make their voices heard and continue their activism. No one could defend women better than women themselves.

D. Statements by representatives of States and observers

44. During the dialogue, speakers reiterated that ICTs had created a revolution in the way people interacted with each other, how they worked and how they lived. They stressed that ICTs could be powerful tools and had a vast potential for improving every sphere of the lives of women and girls by allowing women to gain a stronger voice in their communities and to be involved in the political and public life of their countries. Speakers noted the importance of social media, which had made grass-roots movements such as #MeToo more visible, audible and influential. ICTs could also be an important tool for enabling women and girls in rural and remote communities to engage in public and economic life, as well as include the most disadvantaged groups.

45. It was acknowledged that digital technologies could offer vital access to information and education and could be an enabling factor in ending discrimination and violence. ICTs could also ensure women's full and equal participation in all spheres of society and in all decision-making processes, including conflict prevention, peacemaking and peacebuilding. Speakers fully agreed that ICTs could strengthen women's economic independence and autonomy, which in turn would enhance means to increase investment in education, health care and other social services. Several speakers also highlighted that the active participation of women in the information society was not only a matter of gender equality, but could contribute to improving competitiveness and economic conditions in society more broadly.

46. The gender digital divide was both a cause and a consequence of violations of women's rights. Speakers acknowledged that harmful gender stereotypes and systemic power imbalances offline had influenced the online world and that new technologies therefore bore the risk of exacerbating pre-existing offline inequalities and exclusion. They also agreed that the gender digital divide was an obstacle to gender equality. By missing out on the significant amount of human and financial resources that could be provided by women's equal participation in economic life, opportunities to improve the lives of women and girls were lost and the economic development potential of all countries was affected; this was especially the case for developing countries.

47. To advance women's rights in the economic sphere and eliminate the gender digital divide, speakers stressed Governments' obligation to provide women and girls with equal access to quality education and training in relevant digital skills and technology, investing in girls to pursue education in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Speakers acknowledged that harmful gender stereotypes and bias which precluded women's and girls' meaningful access to and participation in ICTs needed to be challenged. Several speakers emphasized that the structural causes of gender inequality and its consequences, such as online violence, discrimination against women in the workplace and the gender pay gap, needed to be addressed. Moreover, women and girls needed to be seen as equal and

active creators of ICTs, not simply as users; they were essential and effective partners for change. Speakers stressed the importance of engaging youth, especially young women and girls, to bridge the gender digital gap. Solutions created not just for youth but by and with youth would lead to faster and more sustainable results.

48. Speakers reiterated that the Internet must be open, global, accessible and safe. Policies to improve Internet access needed to be comprehensive and gender responsive, addressing the underlying causes of gender inequality. Several speakers agreed that a gendered and intersectional analysis of new and emerging technologies (e.g. artificial intelligence) was necessary in order to advance women's rights rather than reinforce and deepen existing inequalities. A human rights-based approach to advancing women's and girls' rights was considered vital and many speakers underlined the Sustainable Development Goals, for example Goals 1, 4, 4, 5 and 9, as an important tool to complement the existing human rights obligation of States to bridge the gender digital divide. Speakers reiterated that both States and the private sector had a role to play and a responsibility to make available innovative digital technologies and applications that respected their human rights obligations.

E. Responses by panellists and concluding remarks

49. In his concluding remarks, Mr. Shadrach, commenting on how to reach women and girls living in remote and rural areas, highlighted two practical examples from South Asia. Both in Bangladesh and in India, numerous online digital centres had been developed which ran e-platforms to create online businesses, for example the Sheba company in Bangladesh. Those centres enabled women to acquire digital skills and market their produce online, and were often led by women themselves. He also reflected on ways for women to protect themselves and their businesses, stating that e-consumer forums, where peer-to-peer opportunities to learn and share information could be shared, were a concrete solution.

50. Ms. Chair stressed that all actors involved in the area, whether Government, private sector or civil society, should ensure women's participation in ICT not simply as consumers but also as creators and as part of the decision-making processes. This meant engaging with women in identifying what their role could be and how they would like to contribute; these contributions could go beyond coding and providing technical capacity to other processes in the ICT development process. She also underlined the importance of both Government and the private sector investing in systematically engaging young people on how they could improve technology to enhance their lives, both in ICT spaces and at intergovernmental forums such as the Human Rights Council.

51. Ms. Ndir reflected upon the role that international organizations could play in advancing women's rights through ICTs and eliminating the gender digital divide. She noted that a first step would be digital literacy training, giving the example of the International Organisation of La Francophonie, which had opened an ICT training centre specifically aimed at young people, especially girls, that allowed girls to become developers and important actors in that field. She also mentioned the Smart Africa initiative, the focus of which was to make digital technology a genuine catalyst for development in the region, specifically tackling the gender digital divide. She concluded that a global strategy was needed that effectively coached States in how to eliminate the existing digital divide.

52. The moderator concluded the panel discussion with three recommendations. Firstly, given that more than 90 per cent of all new jobs will have a digital component, there is an urgent need to ensure that women have the skills to benefit from the upcoming digital economy. Secondly, Governments have a key role to play and programmes and best practices need to be shared more broadly. Finally, women and girls need to be provided with the means to not only be receivers of, but also creators and decision makers in, technology.